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SUBJECT: KIRILL ELECTED 16TH RUSSIAN ORTHODOX PATRIARCH

REF: MOSCOW 106

11. (SBU) Summary. Leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) gathered on January 27 at Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior to elect Acting Patriarch Metropolitan Kirill as the Church's 16th Patriarch. Seventy-two percent of delegates picked Kirill, who deftly used his position and the media during the race to prevail over his sole competitor Metropolitan Kliment. World religious leaders and Russian government officials congratulated Kirill, with particular praise coming from the Vatican against the backdrop of improving Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and Russian Orthodox Church relations. The election, the first religious event widely broadcast throughout Russia, drew vast media attention, but also a few protesters, and an alleged temporary closing of a separatist church website. Pundits debated the future course of the ROC under the new Patriarch, naming reconciliation with the RCC and unity with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as his top priorities, and questioning to what degree would the ROC cooperate with the Kremlin. End Summary.

Charismatic Over Conservative

12. (SBU) In a landslide victory on January 27, the Local Council of the ROC chose the charismatic and liberal Metropolitan Kirill over conservative Metropolitan Kliment as the 16th Russian Patriarch, positioning the Church for greater engagement domestically and abroad. The voting lasted approximately four hours, culminating in an announcement at 2200 in the main hall of Christ the Savior Church, temporarily provisioned with voting booths for the occasion. The Acting Patriarch (Locum Tenens) Kirill drew support from 72 percent of the delegates, receiving 508 of the 702 votes cast at Christ the Savior Cathedral in central Moscow. Kirill's sole competitor on the ballot, the conservative Metropolitan Kliment of Kaluga and Borovsk, tallied only 169 votes, or 24 percent. Election administrators declared another 23 ballots invalid. Kirill and Kliment were the only two candidates because the third candidate selected by the Bishops' Council on January 25, Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk and Slutsk, withdrew from the race just hours ahead of the final vote and encouraged his supporters to vote for Kirill. Although ROC rules allowed for the possible introduction of a fourth candidate on the ballot, should that person receive the support of 50 percent of the Local Council, no other contenders challenged Kirill or Kliment.

13. (SBU) Even though most theologians and media outlets listed Kirill as the frontrunner, none expected the margin of victory to be so wide. While Kirill received 72 percent of the final vote in the Local Council, he pulled in only 49 percent of the ballots during the earlier Bishops' Council (reftel), a likely consequence of many bishops voting in favor of their local hierarchs. Several journalists commented that Kirill completely outplayed Kliment in the media sphere, skillfully utilizing his role as Acting Patriarch to hold widely-broadcast holiday religious

services, ecumenical seminars, and press conferences in the run-up to the election. A January 28 Kommersant article pointed to the early elections, held only seven weeks after Aleksey's death, as an advantage for Kirill in that it prevented any serious competitor from launching a full-fledged informational campaign to counter him. Other analysts attributed Kirill's victory, in part, to Metropolitan Vladimir of Kyiv and All Ukraine's decision to withdraw from the race, ultimately fracturing the otherwise united support of the Ukrainian delegation and strengthening Metropolitan Kirill's support base, according to a January 19 Kommersant article.

Vatican "Rejoices" Over News of Kirill

¶4. (SBU) While many religious and human rights officials provided conservative well wishes to Kirill after his election, a Roman Catholic Church (RCC) spokesman said the Vatican "rejoiced" over the news. Vatican spokesman in Moscow Rev. Federico Lombardi said Kirill was "esteemed in the Vatican," and hoped his service would deepen the level of collaboration and understanding between the churches, according to the Associated Press. Other religious leaders offered their congratulations, including Chief Rabbi of Moscow Beryl Lazar, who expressed appreciation for Kirill's work at the inter-religious council. Head of Russian Buddhists Pandito Hambo Lama Damba Ayusheyev praised the ROC's selection, saying that Kirill "will contribute to the further development of tolerance in Russian society." Human rights activist Lyudmilya Alekseyeva took a different tack, telling Interfax news agency that the ROC should "instill

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serenity and tolerance in its congregation," while hoping that the Church would remain separate from the state.

¶5. (SBU) Both Medvedev and Putin called Kirill to offer him their best wishes, noting the importance of the ROC to the state. Medvedev sent a statement to the Local Council, saying that he hoped Kirill would "further develop the fruitful cooperation of the Russian Orthodox Church and the state." For his part, Kirill remarked in previous weeks that church-state relations should be founded on "mutual non-interference in each other's affairs," suggesting the possibility that friction existed in their outlooks. Russian news daily Gazeta suggested on January 28 that Kirill had grown closer to both Medvedev and Putin in recent months, while suggesting that the defeated Kliment would probably find a new role with government support, possibly with support from First Lady Svetlana Medvedeva. Levada Center's Boris Dubin noted to us on January 28 that the state cannot afford to ignore the church, as it was one of three institutions (the others being the president and the army) that people trusted, especially since the new patriarch will lead 165 million believers worldwide (approximately 100 million of whom are in Russia) from 157 dioceses in over 60 countries.

Nashi Supporters Prevent Protests

¶6. (SBU) Between 200 and 300 people, including members of Kremlin-backed youth group Nashi's Orthodox Corps, gathered near Christ the Savior Cathedral on the morning of the Bishops' Council to deter anti-ROC protests. Nashi's Orthodox Corps, led by Boris Yakimenko, waved supportive banners and placards outside the church and the nearby Friedrich Engels monument, with slogans reading "May the Holy Spirit Point to a Worthy Man" and "We are for a United Church." Director of the Moscow branch of the Union of Orthodox Citizens Kirill Frolov added that "our goal is to demonstrate that the smear campaign against Metropolitan Kirill is a campaign against the ROC." Approximately 30 supporters of defrocked Bishop Diomid of Chukhotka, described by Interfax news agency as "belligerent women in headscarves

and ragged men with beards", quarreled with police near the entrance to the church without incident. Moscow Police Chief Vladimir Pronin reported that 12,000 law enforcement officers would be involved in election and enthronement proceedings until February 3, with over 250 officers set to guard local churches from attacks by vandals or youth opposed to Church hypocrisy.

Wide Media Coverage, With Exceptions

17. (SBU) Several Russian media outlets provided live news coverage of the Patriarchal election procedure, including leading television broadcasters Channel One, Rossiya, and Vesti as well as radio stations Voice of Russia and Radio Rossiya. The new Orthodox television station Spas (Savior) also covered the Local Council meeting, using footage from Vesti news channel. With the rise of importance of Russian Orthodoxy in the country, so too the number of Russian Orthodox media outlets has risen. Approximately 3,500 Russian Orthodox blogs and hundreds of newspapers and magazines covered the Moscow Patriarchate's activity in 2008.

The most successful Orthodox magazine, according to a December 25 New York Times article, has been "Foma," with a staff of 30 and a monthly budget of over USD 100,000, run by its Chief Editor Vladimir Legoyda. Financed by sponsors and some advertising, the article noted that Foma's usual print run of 30,000 exceeded that of the official ROC newspaper Tserkovny Vesnik, which routinely printed 20,000 copies.

18. (SBU) Religious analysis website www.credo-portal.ru Deputy Chief Editor Vladimir Oyvin told us that special services blocked access to his website on the eve of the Bishops' Council "at the request of the Russian Orthodox Church." He added that authorities restricted access to the official website of the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church (ROAC), the home page for a forum of supporters for Bishop Diomid. The Credo portal, known for providing critical commentary of the Moscow Patriarchate, last faced a shutdown during the Kyiv celebrations surrounding 1020th Anniversary of the Baptism of Holy Rus in July 2008. Deacon Kurayev labeled the Credo portal an "anti-Kirill" site, perhaps suggesting that Kirill supporters leaned on officials in order to block it.

The Future ROC

19. (SBU) Charting the Church's future course featured prominently in media debate prior to the election, especially

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with regard to the ROC's possible reconciliation with the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) after the Christian schism of 1054 that separated Christianity into Eastern and Western branches. While Kirill's meeting with Pope Benedict XVI in the Vatican on December 2007, as the head of the ROC's foreign ministry equivalent, represented growing clergy interest in finding a common ground with the RCC, Patriarch-elect Kirill clarified on January 27 that he would not meet the Pope unless tensions between the faiths are resolved. The main sticking point in discussions between the Vatican and Russian Orthodox officials remained the ROC's complaint that the RCC continued its attempts to convert Orthodox believers to Catholicism on the ROC's traditional territory. Deacon and theologian Andrey Kurayev commented to Kommersant on January 28 that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) stood as the biggest challenge for the Moscow Patriarchate, namely because of dual pressure from Constantinople and President Yushenko to move the UOC under Constantinople's authority. The UOC also faced a separatist element inside the UOC itself, which hopes to move out from under the Moscow Patriarchate's authority. UOC delegate to the Local Council Archimandrite Antony called on Kirill to unite the ROC on January 27, in hopes that all could overcome a potential split. Kirill also needs to turn his attention

homeward, as 69% of Russians could not name him in a January 22 VTsIOM poll.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) The current economic crisis and demographic quagmire in Russia will absorb much of Kirill's energy, drawing his attention away from past ecumenical tasks abroad.

While his intelligence and charisma represent beacons to attract Orthodox believers in a declining Russian population, the Church seems ill-equipped to appeal significantly to youth accustomed to the consumer lifestyle he condemns as a "Western" affront on Christianity. Kirill's complaints that courses teaching the fundamental principles of Russian Orthodoxy have stalled, and that legal foundations for the work of clergy in the military have not developed quickly enough, indicate his ambition to push religion into core state functions. Whether Kirill's independent spirit and penchant for separation of church-state functions will openly collide with a Kremlin accustomed to Church subservience remains an issue that we will continue to follow closely.

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